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Some Lessons from the Life of Abraham Lincoln

GEO. H. ELLIS

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SOME LESSONS FROM THE LIFE OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

I TAKE one text from the New Testament and two from the writings of Lincoln himself. The first is from the First Epistle of John, the fourth chapter and the seventh verse,—“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God and knoweth God.” The second is from the second Inaugural Address, delivered March 4, 1865,—“With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in.” The third is from a private letter to his friend Speed,—“Die when I may, I want it said of me by those who know me best that I always plucked a thistle and planted a flower where I thought a flower would grow.”

Such curious creatures of tradition are we that it would not surprise me if there were persons here this morning who should question the propriety of my taking a text from anything except some Biblical writing. As a matter of fact, the use of texts by Christian preachers is comparatively a modern custom. In the next place I do not know where any nobler words can be found in any Scripture, written in any nation or in any age in the history of all the world, than those which I have given you from Lincoln himself. Should I take the name of some person mentioned in the Bible as my subject, no one would question that it was a sermon I was to preach, no matter how little might be known of him, no matter though we knew a great deal and that great deal were disreputable,—it would be a sermon if the man’s name happened to be mentioned in the

Bible. But perhaps there are persons here who will wonder whether it is not a lecture, or a secular address, because Lincoln happened to live since the writing of the Bible was completed. But, as I have said concerning the words, no finer can be read in any Scripture, so I say concerning Lincoln. Leaving one side the central character, the Nazarene, there is no man mentioned in the Bible, from the first verse of Genesis to the last of Revelation, who can be regarded as Lincoln's superior, either for greatness or for goodness. And, since God is ultimately the author of all Scripture and the Creator of all grand characters, may we not find a sermon in some one of his higher and finer, because later, creations? Let us then put aside all question or thought or criticism of this nature, and note some of the salient and instructive incidents in his career and the features of his character.

Since his death we have learned facts in regard to his origin, the blood that flowed in his veins, with which he himself was not familiar. It is sometimes said that a man is the product of inheritance and of environment. Undoubtedly, in some large and general way this is true; and yet we cannot carry out an idea like this in any minute fashion. A poet does not necessarily give birth to poets for children; and men born in the midst of poetical surroundings are not always distinguished for the possession of poetic gifts. Yet, in some large and general way, this is true.

What blood, then, flowed in the veins of Lincoln? He was English, and New England sifted through the South. From a Norfolk family in England we trace the stream to Salem, Hingham, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Kentucky, Illinois. Sometimes the stream ran faint and feeble. Sometimes it was underground. Then, again, it came to the light. Sometimes it was muddy. Sometimes it was clear. But, at the last, it sprung up into a fountain of life and health and healing for the nation.

You are familiar with the schooling of Lincoln's poverty

during his childhood. I am no friend of poverty. If it be true that the poor we have always with us, I accept it as a fact, but count it a misfortune rather than a blessing. I have been too well acquainted with it myself to have any love for it. But we need to distinguish between the kind of poverty which Lincoln endured and that which marks the slums of our great cities,—that poverty which is close akin to deceit, to theft, to vice, to beggary, to evil of every kind. Lincoln knew nothing of poverty such as that. His was that healthy, outdoor poverty of the frontier, which struggles grimly, sometimes desperately, with adverse conditions, but which has health, at least, for a possibility in the physical veins, and does not carry with it the temptation to degrading vices, does not carry with it any taint of sycophancy, beggary, and degeneration of the moral nature. Lincoln was a poor boy, who struggled against every kind of obstacle, and educated himself only because he had in him a thirst for knowledge.

I wish to note, in passing, the kind of education which Lincoln attained. Was he educated in the true sense of that word? That depends entirely upon what we mean by it. If only college-bred men are educated, then, of course, he was not. If only men who can read Latin or speak French or German are educated, then of course, again, he was not. If only men familiar with the great literary and art treasures of the world are educated, then again, of course, he was not. If men only are educated who have been able to devote themselves to profound researches in philosophy and science, then again, of course, he was not. He was not educated in the sense of having been made a receptacle into which facts were poured. A man may be brimful, running over with facts and information of every kind, and still be a fool. This does not constitute education. A man is educated who is so trained in his perceptive faculties, in his analytical powers, so trained in all his abilities of one kind and another, that, put him down in the midst of difficult surroundings, he will be able to see where

he is, able to understand what the occasion calls for, be able to master his conditions instead of being overwhelmed by them. The man who can master himself and master his surroundings, wherever he may be, only give him a little time,—he is an educated man. And the man who is the victim of his conditions and surroundings, with no practical ability or power, may know ever so much, but he is not educated.

Lincoln was one of the most grandly educated men of his generation; and yet he was ignorant of the great majority of things that people foolishly suppose to be absolutely essential to education. As an illustration, perhaps I may be pardoned for telling an anecdote with which you may be familiar, which illustrates the point I have been trying to make.

It is said that a man was being sailed across a lake somewhere in the Old World by a boatman, and that this gentleman was a puffed-up and conceited scholar and literary man. He fell into conversation with the boatman, and said to him, "Have you ever studied philosophy?" And when the answer came, "No," he said, "Then a quarter of your life is lost." Then he said, "Did you ever study science?" And the answer being the same, he replied, "Then another quarter of it is lost." "Do you know anything about art?" "No." "Well, then, another quarter of your life is gone." Just then a squall struck the boat, and the boatman turned and said, "Sir, can you swim?" "No," came the answer. "Well, then," the boatman replied, "the whole of your life is lost."

The one thing of first importance is to be able to swim, and that art and science Lincoln had grandly mastered.

Let us note in passing—I wish only that you give a glimpse at it—how closely in touch he was with the common people, the common thought, the common life. He was one of the common people; and the circumstances of his life made the grocery store of a Western village the

centre of all political discussion, discussion of every kind that concerned the life of the people, and Lincoln, as the result of his natural powers and abilities, became the centre, leader, master, of these discussions. This was where all public questions were discussed and settled. Lincoln could tell the best and most pointed story, and could analyze the problems that came up, and help decide the great questions of the day better than any man in the midst of the surrounding country where he lived.

Now I wish to note the kind of character that he developed; and this seems native, to have sprung up as water springs from some hidden source under ground whose ultimate and far-away fountain is God. The honesty of his character, the simple fact that he was called "Honest Abe," singled him out as peculiarly and distinctly honest. He did not borrow what honesty he had from his neighbors. We know there were plenty of questionable and slippery characters in the midst of those that made up his neighborhood in his ordinary life; but there was this integrity in the man's character that made it utterly impossible for him to be anything but honest.

You remember that one little incident, characteristic of the man, just as a little chipping from a granite block will let you see the quality of the whole quarry. He had been postmaster at the little town of New Salem,—one of those small towns that flourished for a while and then went out of existence,—and, when the business of the office was wound up, it being very difficult in those days to communicate with Washington, Lincoln put away what was left of money that belonged to the government until it could be called for. Some years afterwards an agent of the post-office called for a settlement of the accounts. Lincoln not only gave him the accounts, but went to the bottom of a trunk and picked out an old stocking, and out of that stocking took the identical silver and copper coins which belonged to the government when he wound up his affairs, and, turning them over

to the agent, said,— what would make a revolution in the life of this country if everybody could say,— “I never use any money but my own.”

I do not mean by this that a man has not a right to borrow money that is not his own; for, if he borrows it legitimately, it is his own for the time being. But, if the business of this country could be conducted in that fashion, the millennium that people dream of would be some millions of years nearer to us than it appears, so far as we can discern any signs of its coming.

Honest in his personal character, honest in his professional character. I am perfectly well aware that there are any number of good lawyers who claim, and honestly claim, that they have a perfect right to fight to attain anything for their clients that the law will permit them to attain, whether it is morally permissible or not. They say we did not make the laws. It is our business to help administer law in accordance with the statutes; and, if we can gain a point for our clients and gain it legally, it is honest and right for us to do it. There are large numbers of honest men in the legal profession who hold that theory of their position and work. There are others, however, who differ. I have a friend in a prominent position in Washington who studied law when he was a young man; and, when his professor told him that such things were permissible and practised commonly at the bar, he said, “Well, I won’t be a lawyer.” And he studied something else instead.

Lincoln’s theory of law practice was different from this. He carried his idea of honesty into his profession to such an extent that the simple fact that he was ready to advocate any particular side was always proof to the jury that that side ought to win; for they knew that Lincoln was keen, that he could analyze, that he could discover the facts. And they said, We know he wouldn’t take a case that he didn’t believe was right. That was the way he practised law. As an illustration of it, it is said that one day Hern-

don, his law partner, in preparing a case, guessed at something, thought it might be true, and put it forward as one plea. Lincoln looked over the brief, and he said, "Herdon, do you know if that is so?" The answer was, "No," that he had guessed at it. Then Lincoln said: "Herndon, that comes pretty near being a sham; and a sham comes pretty near to being a lie. Don't let it go on the record. If you do, some day this cursed thing may come up and stare us in the face long after the case is settled." That is the way he conducted his law cases.

There were two young men, children of an old friend of his, whom another lawyer had led into sharp practices. They were trying to win a dishonest case. Lincoln appeared on the other side, and pleaded with the jury to convict them for their own sake. He said, These boys are children of an old friend of mine, and I want to save them if I can; and I plead with you to convict them, to deliver them from the course of dishonesty on which they are entering, to help teach them the lesson that it won't pay.

In another case a man came to him, and said, "Lincoln, I wish you would prosecute this claim for me." Lincoln looked it over; and he said: "Yes, I think I could win it. I could get these few hundred dollars from the widow with her helpless children; but I think it probably belongs to her quite as much as to you. I could do it, but I won't; for there are some legal rights which are moral wrongs."

And, then, he did another thing which, I presume, would astonish most New York clients. He tried a case: and his law partner, Lamon it happened to be at that time, took a fee of \$250, which he offered to share with Lincoln. It was a case for a poor young woman whose mind was weak, and who could not look after her own interests; and Lincoln said, "Lamon, I won't touch any half of any fee until you send half of that back: it is too large a fee for the services we have rendered." This was the quality of the man. Do you wonder that he came to be looked upon with universal and

unlimited trust by the common people, as they learned to know what manner of man he was?

It is not my business this morning to give you his biography, to tell you in detail the outlines of his career. I wish to pick up certain lessons which we may apply to ourselves day by day. Note the tenderness, the tender heartedness, the humanity of the great, strong, heroic soul,—tenderness that did not simply take in all mankind, but everything that could feel, that led him even to forget the dignity of his character and his actions if he could prevent pain. As an illustration, he was riding with some other lawyers on a certain occasion. They missed him from their company; and pretty soon he appeared, covered with mud from head to feet,—as he might easily do, as any of you will know who understand what those Western roads can be,—and they found he had got off of his horse for the sake of unmiring a pig which was sinking slowly down into suffocation. If any of you can find a nobler thing than that done by anybody anywhere, though it may not lend itself to heroic verse, I would like to hear the tale.

He was so tender-hearted in his dealings with those who had broken the laws of the land that, so far as I have been able to study his career, I have found only one case where he wilfully and purposely, and with apparent gladness, refused to pardon. I do not mean by this that he pardoned everybody; but he wanted to. He refused once to pardon a slave-trader. That is the only case I have ever discovered. He had very little sympathy with a man who could trade in his fellow-men. They used to find fault with him, as I well remember, because he was so lenient with those who were guilty of breaches of military discipline. He said on a certain occasion, writing to a friend, "It rests me, after a hard day's work, to hunt for and find some good reason for pardoning a poor fellow who is condemned to be shot; and I can go to bed happy, thinking how joyous I have made him and his family and his friends." This

great, all-embracing tenderness, tender as he who,—when hanging on the cross,—said, “Father, forgive them: they know not what they do!”

I wish to note, in passing,—though this is no necessary part of my theme,—the greatness of Lincoln. And let me say here, as springing out of that thought, that the nation is blessed that has great men; and these great men are not always to be envied on account of the supposed happiness which they enjoy. I believe it is rather true that the greatest souls of the world have been burdened, sad, tragic souls,—lonely, like some mountain summits, cold in their isolation; but, like mountain summits, they are the sources of the streams that trickle down their sides to fertilize and beautify the valleys and to bear up on their bosoms the commerce of the world.

It is sometimes said that we must imitate God. No, friends, just in so far as God is pictured to us as being unhuman, or super-human, unlike man, just so far is it impossible for us to imitate him. We can only imitate human qualities; and here is one objection that I have to the lifting of Jesus out of the range of our human sympathies. It is only as he was a man that we can tread in his steps, that we can find in him inspiration and uplift towards noble and grand things.

I have been asked a great many times, if evolution is true, why it is that the great men, so many of them, were in the past. Why do we not have the greatest men now, if the world is growing and lifting and rising all the time? If this were the place, I could go into a wide and elaborate discussion of that subject. I can touch now on only one thought concerning it. I think that the popular impression that the great men are in the past springs out of an entire misconception of the past, and our tendency always to idealize that which is a good ways off. For example, we talk about Plato, Aristotle, the great philosophers of the olden time. There is not a philosopher in all the past history of

the world who, for grasp and breadth of mind, for information, for analytical, for constructive power, can be placed beside Herbert Spencer. Aristotle and Plato, as thinkers, were not his equals. So it is not true that the great men were all in the past.

This leads me to say of Lincoln that I do not know of any man in the past history of the world that I believe will be estimated in the future as being greater than he,— great not only in these moral qualities, but great in intellectual grasp and power. Those who have studied the inside history of the nation during the time that he was at the head of affairs know that it was he more than everybody else that saved the nation. It was one of the most fortunate things that ever happened in this country that Seward, for example, had made himself so unpopular in Pennsylvania that the political managers felt he could not carry that State in the election, and so did not dare to nominate him. This was the turning-point in the history of Lincoln. This country would have been ruined in a year if any one other than Lincoln had been in his place. He mastered the strategies of the battlefield as well as did the soldiers; and he had the instinct for selecting the best men and putting them in the right place and keeping them there. People say Grant saved the nation; but Lincoln saved Grant. Grant would have been turned out of his position over and over again but for Lincoln. He said, "I can't spare that man: he fights." And you remember the familiar story of how, when they told him of Grant's drinking, Lincoln replied, "I wish I could find the kind of liquor he drinks, so that I could give it to my other generals."

It was Lincoln, then, Lincoln's intellectual power as well as his moral power, that saved the nation in our great crisis.

I want to touch for a moment on that other quality of Lincoln's character that is always associated with him in our memory, his keen sense of humor. This is not the

place nor is this the hour for me to give you illustrations of it. I simply note it as being one of the great and most important, as I believe, constituents in his character. In the first place, it is a saving quality in any man. The man who can smile at his own discomforts, at disasters that come to himself, is safe. The man who can relieve the great tension of bearing public burdens is safe. Lincoln used to speak of this, or his friends used to speak of it for him, as his safety-valve; and, when some found fault with him for indulging in it on what seemed unfitting occasions, he said wearily, "If I could not laugh, I should die." Lincoln's humor, his laughter, his mirth, was only the spray on the crest of white caps that rolled over the fathomless deeps where were caverns and mysteries that reached down to the heart of the world. Lincoln was blessed by this power of humor, which helped him bear himself bravely and find relief in the midst of the great stress and burden of his public affairs.

A personal friend of mine tells me of meeting him one night, or rather morning, in the grounds of the White House. He told the story so graphically that, if I could reproduce it, you would see him as I did and as my friend saw him. It seemed to be typical of his character. This friend was spending the night in Washington, and it was very warm in the summer; and he got up, being not far away from the White House, and thought he would stroll through the grounds. It was between two and three o'clock in the morning. He was walking leisurely along one of the paths when he saw a strange figure coming. He stopped a moment, and knew it was the President. He had on a dressing-gown and indoor cap and his slippers, and was walking wearily along, his head bowed. My friend stood one side, and watched that marred face; watched that patient head, as though of an Atlas supporting a world; watched him in the darkness pacing up and down like a shepherd while his people slept, thinking about some great, perplexing problem

of peace or war, with head bowed, until he said the agony of his look was burned into his consciousness so that he should never be able to forget it as long as he lived. So he bore our burdens, carried our sorrows, for our sakes was smitten; and with his stripes we have been healed.

I come now to touch on his religious character, to raise first the question as to whether he had a religious character; for, friends, I propose to do this morning a thing I do not often do. It would help clear the air if people would rise and open their eyes and face facts a little now and then. Was Lincoln a religious man? If we are to judge by the standards asserted and reasserted every day in the year by the Vatican, judged from the point of view of the great Roman Catholic Church, Lincoln was not a Christian or a religious man; and to-day he is tasting the cup of torment pressed to the lips of the lost. If the teaching of the infallible Church is true, Lincoln has never been saved and never can be saved. Judged by the standards of the Anglican Church and the Episcopal Church of this country, Lincoln is lost; and there is no hope for him in any period of the future. Measured by the standards of the Presbyterian Confession of Faith, which is being published still all over Europe and America, Lincoln is lost. He never complied with one single condition of the Presbyterian Church for being saved. Judged by the standards of the great Methodist churches of England and America, Lincoln is lost. Judged by the standards of the great Baptist churches of Europe and America, Lincoln is lost. Judged by the standards of the Congregational churches as affirmed in their great National Council at Plymouth Rock a few years ago, Lincoln is lost.

I say it will do us good now and then to think a little straight and clear. If to say this shocks you, I am not responsible. I did not make the creeds. I am simply telling you what they are. If it seems to you incredible, unbelievable, too horrible to be true, to think that the great,

gentle, magnanimous, loving, tender, helpful man, he who next, perhaps, to Jesus himself, is entitled to be called a Saviour,—if it seems too horrible for you to think of him as being lost, then do not any longer support the creeds that say so. Be honest and clear-headed enough to say on the street what you think in the privacy of your souls.

What was Lincoln's religious opinion and character?

When he was a young man, he wrote a book which would have been called an infidel publication, which would be now if it were in existence. His friends got hold of it, and destroyed it, because they were afraid that it would ruin his political future. Undoubtedly it would have done it. Let me say, in passing, there is not an office in the gift of the American people that might not have been in the reach of Colonel Robert G. Ingersoll if he had been dishonest enough to conceal his opinions. If Lincoln's opinions had been known when he was a young man, they would have ruined his political future. Undoubtedly, he changed those opinions, and approached more nearly to common religious views as he grew older. I will read you an extract from Carpenter's "Six Months at the White House":—

"The conversation turned upon religious subjects, and Mr. Lincoln made this impressive remark: 'I have never united myself to any church, because I have found difficulty in giving my assent, without mental reservation, to the long, complicated statements of Christian doctrine which characterize their Articles of Belief and Confessions of Faith. When any church will inscribe over its altar, as its sole qualification for membership, the Saviour's condensed statement of the substance of both law and gospel, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and thy neighbor as thyself," that church will I join with all my heart and all my soul.' "

Perhaps some of you, although you are Unitarians, do not know that that is precisely the basis of organization of the

National Conference of Unitarian Churches. If Lincoln were alive now, that statement would make him one of our own people; for that is the platform on which we stand — love to God and love to man, as the essence of all true religion, the essence of the religion which Jesus preached and illustrated by his life. I do not mean to claim that, if Lincoln had lived, he would have ever joined a Unitarian church. But I do claim that his real place would have been either with the Universalists or with ourselves.

Lincoln, then, if we are to measure him by the standard of goodness, of devotion to his fellow-men, of consecration to high ideals, of endeavoring to find and follow the law and life of God,— then he was most magnificently religious. Let me repeat here, because it is needed to complete my thought, although I know it is trite, that saying of his concerning getting on to the side of God. When some one asked him why he felt confident that God was on our side, he said, That is a thing I never trouble myself about one way or another: the one thing I am anxious about is to find out where God is, and get on his side. He did not expect to change God; and he tried to find where God was and get beside him. If that makes a man religious, then there is no man in the history of the world more grandly religious than he.

In unselfishness and magnanimity of character, as illustrated in his public attitude and in his dealings with Stanton and Chase, I know of no one with whom to compare him except only the one great soul of Palestine.

One other point at the close. There have been a dozen or twenty theories of the Atonement held since the beginning of speculation. It is too long a story even to hint this morning; but there is a true and profound sense in which the men who have lived grandly and died heroically for truth have atoned. I do not believe — or I should not be in this church — that any one's atonement means a substitution of suffering or goodness for me. I do not believe it

means an appeasing of God's anger or any change in the nature or attitude of God towards any of his children. But I do believe that every man who has been true, every man who has been honest, outspoken, frank, every man who has been faithful to his convictions, every man who has paid the price by unpopularity or pain, any man who has stood firm while fagots have kindled about his feet, any man who for an idea has laid his head on a block, any man who has felt the stifling clutch at his throat for truth, any man who has given himself for God and his fellow-men,—has helped work out the agelong atonement which brings men into perfect reconciliation with God.

So I believe that Lincoln, as I have already said, was bruised for our transgressions. I believe his stripes have helped heal us. His faithfulness, his sorrow, the pangs that he suffered, all these have helped work out the peace, the prosperity, the glory of our great nation.

And if we love Lincoln, if we honor him, if we are worthy of belonging to the same race not simply, but the same country, let us try in our spheres to be a little faithful, as he was much ; to be a little true, as he was much ; to be a little patient, as he was much ; to be a little honest, as he was much ; to be a little devoted to the political welfare and uplifting of the people, as he was always devoted. And then we shall not only help him save the country ; but by and by we may perhaps stand beside him and overlook the work that has been accomplished here, and feel that we are worthy to join in congratulating him on what he accomplished and what we helped to bring to fuller fruition.

I wish to close by reading you two or three lines from Lowell's "Commemoration Ode," the finest tribute, I think that has ever been paid to this greatest of men :—

Nature, they say, doth dote,
And cannot make a man
Save on some worn-out plan,
Repeating us by rote :

For him her Old World moulds aside she threw,
 And, choosing sweet clay from the breast
 Of the unexhausted West,
 With stuff untainted shaped a hero new,
 Wise, steadfast in the strength of God, and true.
 How beautiful to see

Once more a shepherd of mankind indeed,
 Who loved his charge, but never loved to lead ;
 One whose meek flock the people joyed to be,
 Not lured by any cheat of birth,
 But by his clear-grained human worth,
 And brave old wisdom of sincerity !

They knew that outward grace is dust ;
 They could not choose but trust
 In that sure-footed mind's unfaltering skill,
 And supple-tempered will
 That bent like perfect steel to spring again and thrust.
 His was no lonely mountain-peak of mind,
 Thrusting to thin air o'er our cloudy bars,
 A sea-mark now, now lost in vapors blind ;
 Broad prairie rather, genial, level lined,
 Fruitful and friendly for all human kind,
 Yet also nigh to heaven and loved of loftiest stars.
 Nothing of Europe here,

Or, then, of Europe fronting mornward still,
 Ere any names of Serf and Peer
 Could Nature's equal scheme deface
 And thwart her genial will ;
 Here was a type of the true elder race,
 And one of Plutarch's men talked with us face to face.

I praise him not ; it were too late ;
 And some innate weakness there must be
 In him who condescends to victory
 Such as the Present gives, and cannot wait,
 Safe in himself as in a fate.

So always firmly he :
 He knew to bide his time,
 And can his fame abide,
 Still patient in his simple faith sublime,
 Till the wise years decide.

Great captains, with their guns and drums,
 Disturb our judgment for the hour,
 But at last silence comes ;

These all are gone, and, standing like a tower,
Our children shall behold his fame,
The kindly-earnest, brave, foreseeing man,
Sagacious, patient, dreading praise, not blame,
New birth of our new soil, the first American.

Father, we thank Thee for him, Thy great, noble son. We thank Thee that we are fellow-countrymen of his, that the same blood beats in our veins, the same aspirations lift up our hearts, the same great future awaits us and our children. May we be worthy of him ; and may we, in gratitude to Thee for giving him to us, try to live as he lived, and help our country as he helped it. Amen.

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